

Media Suites

If you're having difficulty keeping track of all your photographs, audio and video files, you need a media suite. Ben Pitt tests five packages designed to put your multimedia in order

PC adverts often show computers as futuristic entertainment hubs, where the various streams of our digital lifestyle converge, interact and disseminate around the house with a whoosh of glossy panache. For most people, the reality is a computer that's bogged down with digital photographs, MP3s and videos randomly scattered across the hard disk, and no real understanding as to what half of them are or how they got there in the first place.

A media suite won't transform your home into a stylish loft apartment or turn the missus into a leggy blonde with perfect teeth, but it might get your media files in order and help you do more with them. The more established suites on test originally started life as simple disc-burning software, dating back to before Windows XP when you needed additional software to burn a CD-R. Over the years, they've grown to cover much more than this. These suites let you catalogue, browse and search your media files, watch and create your own DVD-Videos, edit video, photo and audio files, copy (non-protected) two-layer DVD-Videos to single-layer discs (known as recoding), create slideshows, perform backups and design labels for discs. Some suites also handle TV viewing and recording, music production and videoconferencing, and act as a Universal Plug and Play (UPnP) server for beaming media files to other devices around the house.

A QUICK FIX

Because these suites offer so much for so little money, it's not surprising that they generally don't attempt to compete with dedicated software, particularly when it comes to creative tasks such as video or photo editing. For example, any of the products in this review can fix the colours of a photograph, resize it and attach it to an email. However, if you want to remove the bags from under the subject's eyes, you'll need more sophisticated image-editing software. There are some exceptions, though, such as MyDVD 9, which is included with both versions of Roxio's suite. This DVD-authoring program is easily a match for dedicated software such as Ulead

DVD MovieFactory, reviewed in this month's *What's New: Software* on page 46.

However, these suites' simple approaches shouldn't put you off. If you just want to spruce up photographs, create an MP3 ringtone or produce a fun video for uploading to YouTube rather than launching into a conceptual art project, the chances are you'll appreciate their simple controls and task-based approaches.

Some of the suites also benefit from tight integration of their various modules. Rather than presenting its features as a collection of unrelated applications, Roxio often guides the user through various applications to complete a task, while InterVideo manages to combine everything into a single application and still manages to maintain a simple, friendly interface.

PICK AND MIX

Each media suite is such a varied, complex entity it can be hard to figure out which one best meets your needs. To help you decide, on page 126 there's a breakdown of the most important tasks and which suites cover them. Use this as a reference, but be sure to read the reviews as well to get a feeling for how effective each package is in a particular area.

Bear in mind that some of the features provided by these suites might be available elsewhere for free. Skype and various instant messenger programs are a good alternative to Nero and Easy Media Creator's voice-over IP and videoconferencing modules. Similarly, if you like the sound of Magix Goya's online backup and web photo-management features, visit www.xdrive.com and www.flickr.com for comparable services.

However, part of these suites' charm is the fact that each one is a self-contained, integrated package. Many of the tasks they cover may be things you never thought of trying out until they were presented to you in a straightforward, beginner-friendly manner. This is why we value ease of use when rating these packages. The best suites not only make life easier for experienced computer users, but also allow novices to do things they previously thought were beyond their reach.



◀ Most of the media suites in this review include a launcher program that presents their features as a collection of tasks

SOFTWARE LABS

THIS MONTH

Ahead Nero 7 Premium Reloaded

Page 124

CyberLink DVD Suite 5 Pro

Page 124

InterVideo MediaOne Gallery Gold

Page 125

Magix Goya Easy Media

Page 125

Roxio Easy Media Creator 9 Suite/Deluxe Suite

Page 126

AHEAD

Nero 7 Premium Reloaded

★★★★★

£41 inc VAT

Nero 7 Premium Reloaded is a significant free upgrade for existing Nero 7 Premium users, and is the most feature-packed and up-to-date suite on test. It's the only one to support Windows Vista, Blu-ray discs and HD-DVDs. As the table on page 126 shows, there are barely any gaps in its line-up, with web photo gallery creation the only significant omission.

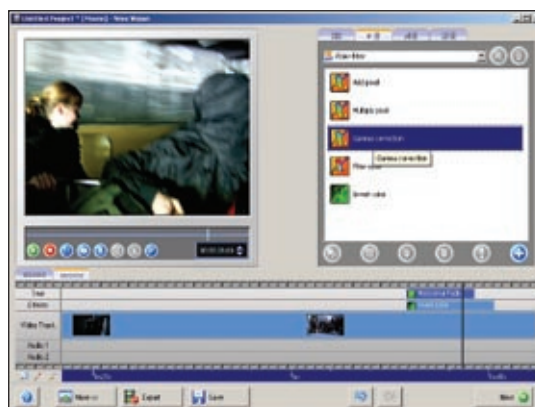
Nero's no-nonsense approach lends itself to certain tasks better than others. The Backup utility is comprehensive, with scheduled incremental backups of entire disk partitions. DVD recoding includes options to omit individual videos and alternative soundtracks, and adjust the relative compression ratio of each one. However, it can't export to DivX, PSP or iPod. You can convert to Nero Digital, which is similar to DivX but isn't as widely supported. If you're more concerned with watching videos rather than sharing them, the bundled Nero Digital player for devices running mobile versions of Windows is a welcome inclusion.

Nero Scout appears in My Computer and

behaves like a storage device, except that its contents are arranged into folders for Music, Photos, Videos, DVDs and Collections. Each of these contains subfolders, arranging media by date and music by artist or album, while Collections has various smart sorting criteria such as favourite music listened to at night.

The big advantage of Nero Scout's integration with My Computer is that it can be accessed from any Windows program. However, it also means that viewing folders of media is subjected to the same limitations as Windows Explorer, and there are no facilities for adding keywords to files. We also found it slow to catalogue our media files.

Nero Vision 4 handles video editing and DVD authoring. It's an odd mix of basic editing tools and support for advanced formats such as high-definition video and surround sound, but the result is a friendly editor that should serve casual users well. DVD authoring



▲ Nero's video editor is basic, but supports a wide range of formats

is basic in terms of navigation options, but menu design is above average, with scope to customise the supplied templates. There are some 3D animated menu templates that aren't editable but present video thumbnails in fun ways.

Nero is the only suite to cover music production. SoundTrax, and its accompanying sound generator, Soundbox, are fun for the odd dabble, but their quirky behaviour will frustrate those with preconceived musical ideas they want to record. Nero isn't the only one to include TV viewing and time-shifting, but its Media Center-style interface is particularly pleasant to use and compatible with various remote controls.

Nero isn't as friendly as Roxio's suite, but with its sheer breadth of dependable features and a generous policy of free updates it still deserves an honourable mention.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Masses of features
- ✓ Support for the latest standards
- ✗ Not as approachable as Roxio's suite

MEDIA SUITE Requires Windows 2000 SP4/XP/Vista, 800MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 1GB disk space, DirectX 9.0c
SUPPLIER www.savastore.com
DETAILS www.nero.com

CYBERLINK

DVD Suite 5 Pro

★★★

£45 inc VAT

DVD Suite 5 Pro is one of the most expensive suites on test but offers relatively few features, with no TV-viewing, audio-editing or media-cataloguing modules. By its own admission it's a suite of DVD- rather than media-related programs, and in this sense it's comprehensive.

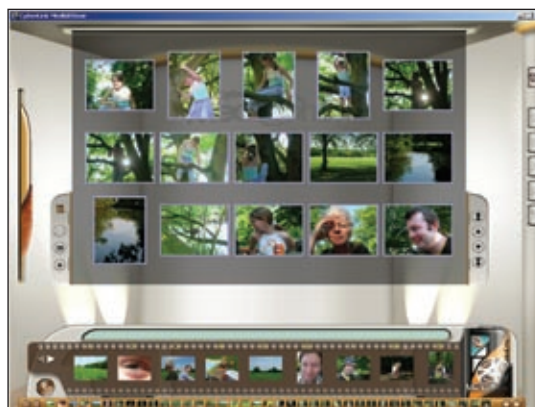
CyberLink's well-known PowerDVD makes an appearance, but PowerDVD 6 Express isn't the latest version. There's support for various high-definition formats and its CLEV-2 image processing is quite effective at warming up the colours of undersaturated video, but without surround-sound support it's not a vast improvement on the DVD-playback software that's bundled with PCs.

PowerDirector 5 Express handles video-editing duties. We weren't very positive in our review of the full version (*What's New: Software, Shopper* April 2006), but casual users will appreciate its collection of editing tools for removing noise and camera shake and even editing raw footage for you. However, no-one will appreciate how clicking certain buttons results in pop-up adverts instructing

them to upgrade to the full version. The most absurd example is the Create Disc button, which instructs you to upgrade to PowerDirector Deluxe rather than launching PowerProducer, the DVD-authoring module that's included in the suite.

Medi@Show is a dedicated application for creating slideshows and has a good range of export options, including DVD-Video and web gallery. However, the more we used the software, the more frustrated we became. Its controls are confusing in places, and jargon such as HTML and DHTML go unexplained. Image quality is seriously compromised in its output for the web because of a shoddy resizing algorithm, and no web space is included for hosting your web galleries. There's a choice of HTML templates, but you see what they actually look like only after selecting and exporting one.

The DVD-recoding module was the only one we genuinely liked. Its Source, Destination and Begin Copying buttons mean it's simple to use, but



▲ Medi@Show creates slideshows for export to DVD Video or the web

advanced options include various techniques to maximise the quality of the main movie. The image editor is up to the task of sprucing up photos but not much else. Data disc burning is straightforward yet comprehensive, and includes audio CD ripping and burning facilities. Apple's iTunes 6 is also included on the installation disc for audio library management. This is the best software at any price for managing large MP3 collections, but you're better off downloading iTunes 7 from www.itunes.co.uk.

Ultimately, £45 is too much to pay, especially as CyberLink hasn't bothered to include full versions of many applications. The adverts, the nagging reminders to register each module and the fact that the software reassigns media file types to open in CyberLink applications all add up to a frustrating user experience.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Handles simple tasks well
- ✗ Overpriced
- ✗ Frustrating to use

MEDIA SUITE Requires Windows 2000/XP, 2.2GHz Pentium 4 processor for all functions, 256MB RAM, 1GB disk space
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.cyberlink.com

INTERVIDEO MediaOne Gallery Gold

★★★

\$50 (around £25)

At first glance, MediaOne Gallery appears to be a media-cataloguing tool rather than a full-blown media suite. In fact, there's a lot more to it, but unlike the others in this review it integrates all its features into one application.

Its core role is to provide quick access to image, video, audio and office document files, each of which has its own tab. On first launch it asks to scan your hard disk for files, but the option to specify folders (such as My Documents) is more practical so as to avoid clogging up your library with irrelevant files.

As a media-searching and cataloguing tool it's effective, with fast browsing of massive collections, the ability to reorder by name, date and resolution and comprehensive keyword tagging. Basic photo editing is included, along with easy export for email and web gallery creation, although web space isn't provided. There are a few other limitations; the Photoshop .psd image format isn't supported, and it had trouble playing QuickTime movies. Audio library management is

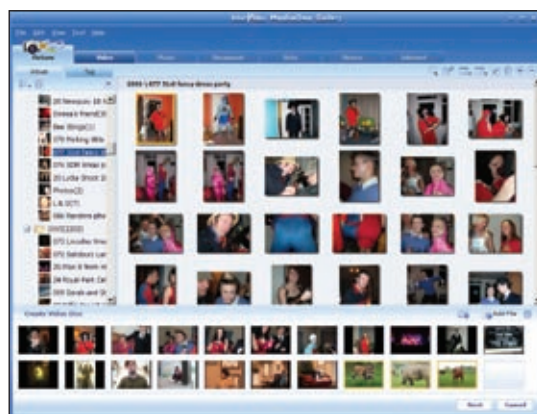
clunky, and you can't listen to music while browsing photographs.

Disc burning is integrated into the media-management views. A Create button gives options to create a data, DVD or audio disc. An additional tab labelled Data gives root-level access to your hard disks for burning files that don't appear under the various media tabs, and there are options for creating bootable and mixed-mode discs. DVD-Video discs can contain a mixture of image and video files, and you can reorder them, add transitions, effects, text and background music and choose a DVD menu template. It's about as basic as video editing and DVD authoring can be, but for running off discs with minimal hassle, it's fine. It's disappointing that choosing music for your DVD is done with a Windows pop-up dialog box rather than via the Music tab; this is the one area where MediaOne Gallery's otherwise friendly, tightly integrated interface has a temporary lapse.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Friendly media-management tools
- ✓ Extremely easy to use
- ✗ Fewer features than the competition

MEDIA SUITE Requires Windows 2000/XP, 800MHz Celeron processor, 128MB RAM (1.6GHz Pentium, 256MB RAM recommended), 150MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.intervideo.com
DETAILS www.intervideo.com



▲ MediaOne Gallery builds various extra features around friendly media-management tools

There's another tab for the built-in web browser, and yet another labelled Devices that provides access to the remaining features: DVD playback, TV viewing and recording (but not time-shifting), video capture, audio CD ripping and uploading of photographs from memory cards and digital cameras. A disc image loader and disc-copying tools, accessible via a Utility button, complete the line-up of functions.

The lack of DVD recoding, backup and audio editing will dissuade some people, as will the basic photo-editing, video-editing and DVD-authoring facilities. But in many ways MediaOne Gallery's simplicity is its greatest strength. As a media-cataloguing tool with built-in disc burning, it succeeds. Its responsive interface ensures it's fun to use, which not all these packages can claim.

MAGIX Goya Easy Media

★★★

£25 inc VAT

Goya is a brand new application that draws on Magix's experience in audio-, photo- and video-editing software. A launcher utility presents a variety of tasks arranged by Music, Photos, Videos and so on, although we're not sure why photo and video editing are filed under Extras rather than Photos and Videos.

Data disc burning is simple, while advanced features such as disc format are available via an Expert Options button. DVD recoding was less impressive, though. You can choose to keep the entire disc structure or just the main movie, but the subtitles were lost on our test disc and the encoding quality was poor.

Music Manager and Photo Manager keep track of media files, with the latter also handling videos but not DVD playback. They weren't particularly pleasant to use; a single application for all media management would be preferable. Photo Manager has a range of additional features, including basic image editing, but we found some features confusing or mysteriously inaccessible at times.

Photos & Videos Easy is a video-editing and

DVD-authoring program with a clean interface that's easy to get to grips with. Its simplicity means it lends itself well to creating a simple slideshow, but there's a decent set of timeline-editing tools for those who want to try their hand at video editing. TV Videorecorder does what its name suggests and includes scheduled recording and timeshifting, but its electronic programme guide is free for only 60 days and its proprietary MVX format is incompatible with non-Magix applications.

Goya's best feature is its online integration, an area the more established competition has not yet cottoned on to. SecuDrive is an online backup tool that supports incremental and encrypted (but not scheduled) backups to a remote server. Only 128MB of storage space is provided, but this might be enough to store your critical office documents. Alternatively, 1GB of storage is available for £3.49 a month, and 3GB for £9.49 a month, but these prices don't compare well with dedicated online backup services.

A further 128MB is provided for an online photo album. This

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent online integration
- ✗ Overly fussy and confusing in places
- ✗ Poor-quality DVD recoding

MEDIA SUITE Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, 500MHz processor, 256MB RAM (512MB recommended), 500MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.magix.co.uk



▲ Photos & Videos Easy is an apt name for Goya's video-editing program

integrates neatly with Photo Manager for uploading, and you can even upload a slideshow complete with music from Photos & Videos Easy. Best of all, uploaded photographs remain fully editable, with a web interface that mirrors the look and feel of the software. You can choose a template for the design of your gallery, add and delete photographs from an album and even edit the colours of uploaded photos. Friends visiting your online gallery can view shots as a full-screen animated slideshow or as a simpler HTML gallery and, if you wish, order prints of your photos. However, we don't like how the website published our name, address and email address for all to see. You can make specific online albums private, but your personal information is always visible.

Goya works well via its task-based launcher, but when we tried to explore its various modules, we often found them inaccessible and confusing.

ROXIO



Easy Media Creator 9 Suite



£47 inc VAT

ROXIO

Easy Media Creator 9 Deluxe Suite



£90 inc VAT

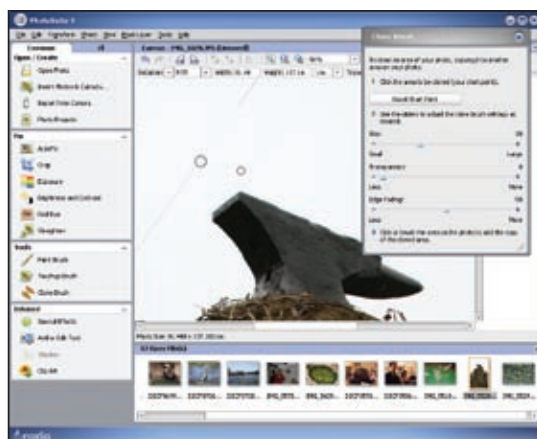
Easy Media Creator 9 Suite picked up a Best Buy award in *What's New: Software, Shopper* January 2007. Roxio's Deluxe Suite builds on the standard version with extra modules and a USB video-capture device. Analogue video capture is fast becoming redundant, but the capture device, a Dazzle DVC90, is delightfully easy to use, thanks to seamless installation and a simple choice of DV or MPEG2 capture, both of which give excellent results. If you have a pile of VHS tapes that you've been meaning to convert to DVD, it's the ideal tool for the job.

The Deluxe Suite also includes SightSpeed videoconferencing software, although as with Nero's voice-over IP application, there isn't much benefit to using it over Instant Messenger or Skype. The standard Suite includes DivX export and audio noise reduction, but these are augmented in the Deluxe Suite by dedicated programs, the DivX Pro Codec and the excellent BIAS SoundSoap SE. There are an additional

SUMMARY

- ✓ **Tightly integrated task-oriented interface**
- ✓ **Capable media-editing software**
- ✗ **No web photo gallery feature**

MEDIA SUITE Requires Windows 2000 SP4/XP (SP2)/Vista, 2GHz Pentium 4 processor and 512MB RAM for all functions, 1GB disk space, DirectX 9
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.roxio.co.uk



▲ The PhotoSuite image editor is the only one to include retouching tools

10 DVD menu themes for MyDVD, which goes some way to rectifying the scant collection in the standard suite.

Disc Gallery is a superb utility for cataloguing the contents of any discs you've burnt, enabling quick searching for a specific file in large archives of optical discs. You can index discs already created, but new ones aren't added automatically; instead you must re-insert the disc and scan it. Considering its simplicity and usefulness, we hope Roxio includes Disc Gallery across its range of disc-burning applications in future.

The rest of the suite appears in both versions of Easy Media Creator. The photo-editing, video-editing and DVD-authoring applications are more approachable and more powerful than anything offered by the competition. PhotoSuite has all the usual simple fixing and resizing tools, but also includes a Clone Brush for more precise photo repair jobs and some attractive

special effects. MyDVD is a very capable DVD-authoring program that will suit casual users and enthusiasts. The same cannot be said for VideoWave, but those new to video editing will appreciate its simple interface.

Roxio's creative applications are impressive, but the highlight is the way the suite joins together. The launcher utility lists various tasks, but it goes further than other suites, with many mini-modules tailored for a specific task. The table below covers only the suite's main applications, and there are just as many single-task modules, such as Audio Tag Editor, which fixes ID3 tags in MP3 files based on scant information and smart

detective work, and Multi Photo Enhance, for enhancing, resizing or renaming groups of shots. Another nice touch is how easy it is to move projects between modules; slideshows created in Slideshow Assistant can be opened for further editing in VideoWave, then sent to MyDVD without having to render first.

There are a few regrettable omissions; there are no web photo gallery facilities or TV time-shifting. We don't like how the suite adds metadata to media files that causes a non-critical but annoying error message when copying them to FAT32-formatted removable storage. However, these criticisms do little to dent the software's otherwise extremely high calibre.

Easy Media Creator 9 Suite is well worth the £60 Roxio charges on its website. At £47 from Dabs.com it's a bargain, and the clear winner in this round-up. The Deluxe Suite includes some tempting extras, although it's unlikely the average user will find them all useful. As such, Roxio's asking price of £90 seems pretty steep, but if its price falls by a similar degree once stock reaches online stores, we'd happily give it an equally warm recommendation. **CS**

★ BEST BUY						
MANUFACTURER	AHEAD	CYBERLINK	INTERVIDEO	MAGIX	ROXIO	ROXIO
Product	Nero 7 Premium Reloaded	DVD Suite 5 Pro	MediaOne Gallery Gold	Goya Easy Media	Easy Media Creator 9 Suite	Easy Media Creator 9 Deluxe Suite
Rating	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★★
FEATURES						
Data burning	Nero Burning ROM 7, Nero Express 7	Power2Go 5.5 DVD Version, Power2Go Express	MediaOne Gallery	Goya Multimedia	Creator 9 Home, Music Disc Creator	Creator 9 Home, Music Disc Creator
HD DVD and Blu-ray Disc support	HD-DVD, Blu-ray Disc	HD-DVD, Blu-ray Disc	No	No	Blu-ray Disc	Blu-ray Disc
Packet writing	InCD 5	InstantBurn	No	No	Drag-to-Disc	Drag-to-Disc
Virtual drive	Nero ImageDrive	No	Virtual Drive	No	Disc Image Loader	Disc Image Loader
Video editing	Nero Vision 4	PowerDirector 5 Express	MediaOne Gallery	Photos & Videos Easy	VideoWave 9, CineMagic	VideoWave 9, CineMagic
DVD authoring	Nero Vision 4	PowerProducer 3	MediaOne Gallery	Photos & Videos Easy	MyDVD 9	MyDVD 9
DVD recoding	Nero Recode 2	PowerDVD Copy	No	Magix Shrinker	Disc Copier	Disc Copier
Export to iPod and PSP	No	No	No	No	Disc Copier	Disc Copier
Audio editing	Nero WaveEditor 3	No	No	Music Editor 2	Sound Editor	Sound Editor, SoundSoap SE 2
Music production	Nero SoundTrax 2	No	No	No	No	No
Photo editing	Nero PhotoSnap	PhotoNow!	MediaOne Gallery	Photo Manager 2006	PhotoSuite 9	PhotoSuite 9
Slideshow creation	Nero Vision 4	Medi@Show 3	MediaOne Gallery	Photos & Videos Easy	Slideshow Assistant	Slideshow Assistant
Online album creation	No	No	MediaOne Gallery	Magix Online Album	LiveShare	LiveShare
Backup	Nero BackItUp 2	PowerBackup 2.5	No	Goya Multimedia	Easy Archive, Backup MyPC, Roxio Backup	Easy Archive, Backup MyPC, Roxio Backup
Online backup	No	No	No	SecuDrive	No	No
DVD/video playback	Nero ShowTime 3 (5.1 surround), Nero Mobile	PowerDVD 6 Express (stereo)	MediaOne Gallery (stereo)	Photo Manager 2006 (no DVD)	CinePlayer (7.1 surround)	CinePlayer (7.1 surround)
TV viewing	Nero Home	No	MediaOne Gallery	TV / Video recorder	No	No
Media cataloguing	Nero Scout	No	MediaOne Gallery	Photo Manager 2006	Media Manager	Media Manager
Music playback	Nero ShowTime 3	iTunes 6	MediaOne Gallery	Music Manager 2006	Digital Media Experience	Digital Media Experience
Label designer	Nero CoverDesigner 2	LabelPrint 2	No	Print Studio	Express Labeler 3	Express Labeler 3
UPnP server	Nero MediaHome	No	No	No	MediaSpace	MediaSpace
Voice over IP/ videoconferencing	Nero Sipps	No	No	No	No	SightSpeed
REQUIREMENTS/BUYING DETAILS						
System requirements	Windows 2000 SP4/XP/Vista, 800MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 1GB disk space, DirectX 9.0c	Windows 2000/XP, 2.2GHz Pentium 4 processor for all functions, 256MB RAM, 1GB disk space	Windows 2000/XP, 800MHz Celeron processor, 128MB RAM (1.6GHz Pentium 4, 256MB RAM recommended), 150MB disk space	Windows 2000/XP/Vista, 500MHz processor, 256MB RAM (512MB recommended), 500MB disk space	Windows 2000 SP4/XP (SP2)/Vista, 2GHz Pentium 4 processor and 512MB RAM for all functions, 1GB disk space, DirectX 9	Windows 2000 SP4/XP (SP2)/Vista, 2GHz Pentium 4 processor and 512MB RAM for all functions, 1GB disk space, DirectX 9
Price	£41 including VAT	£45 including VAT	\$50 (around £25)	£25 including VAT	£47 including VAT	£90 including VAT
Supplier	www.savastore.com	www.amazon.co.uk	www.intervideo.com	www.amazon.co.uk	www.dabs.com	www.roxio.co.uk
Details	www.nero.com	www.cyberlink.com	www.intervideo.com	www.magix.co.uk	www.roxio.co.uk	www.roxio.co.uk